Men at Ease

Gary Lee

curated by Maurice O’Riordan

23 April - 22 May 2010
Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Brisbane

613 Stanley Street, Woolloongabba

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Above: Frank, 2006, Lambda print, image size: 42 x 56cm, paper size: 49 x 63cm
Front: Self-portrait with Manish II, 2003, digital print on Hahnemuhle paper, image size: 62.19 x 42.2cm, paper size: 69.19 x 49.2cm

Biography

Gary Lee (b.1952)
Aboriginal nations: Larrakia/Wardaman
Domicile: Canberra
Education: Current Research Fellow (Ph.D), Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Selected Exhibitions:
1993: Member’s Show, 24HR Art NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin
2001: Campsites, Darwin Visual Arts Association, Darwin
2005: Billimack, Charles Darwin University Gallery, Darwin
2006: Togart Contemporary Art Award (NT), Parliament House, Darwin
2007: Tjala National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, Museum and Art Gallery of NT, Darwin
2007: Jambalab, 24HR Art NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, and Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra
2008: More Than My Skin, Campbelltown Art Centre, Sydney, nationally touring exhibition in 2009
2008: Maast Maast (solo exhibition), 24HR Art NT Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin
2010: Gayme, Counihan Gallery, Brunswick, Melbourne
2010: On the Verge (solo exhibition), Sheahan Galleries, Clifton

Collections:
Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, National Gallery of Australia, private collections in Australia, Singapore, India

Commissions / Awards:
1986: Overall winner, Canberra Fashion Awards, Canberra
1998: Photographer, Anti-homophobia campaign poster, Sydney Anti-Violence Committee and Eora Aboriginal TAFE College, Sydney
1999: Photographer, Indigenous Gay Men and Sister Girl Calendar, AFAO, Sydney
1999-2002: Art design, Sydney Harbour Bridge, New Year’s Eve Celebrations, City of Sydney, Sydney

Selected Bibliography:
1998: Artist profile in Photofile, No. 55, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
2001: O’Riordan, M., ‘Photograph as Performative Trace’, Art News Magazine of India, Vol. 6, No. 4, Mumbai
2003: Artist profile in Photofile, No. 68, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
2008: Pannersberger, C., exhibition preview for Maast Maast, Photofile, No. 84, Sydney
2010: Blaker D., ‘No frills’, catalogue essay for Day Visitor, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra

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Men at Ease

I've had the pleasure of observing Gary Lee's 18-year-long photographic career at close range, and been a participant for a small part of it. While 1993 marks Lee's beginning as a photographer, with the start of his Nice Coloured Boys series first in Bangladesh, and in Nepal and India soon after, there was some precedence in the photographs he took on his first trip to India around 1970. Back then, he was struck by the familiarity of the diverse-looking men in India with that of Aboriginal/coloured men from his hometown Darwin – men and boys from his own and other longstanding Darwin Aboriginal families. Lee also recalls a touch of the ‘hesitant tourist’ in these early photographs (fixing on images of children as easy subjects), and of the exotic: ‘One of the first male portraits I took there was of a Sikh malaga. I said, “Can I have a look at your hair?” He took his turban off and he unrolled his hair, and it was beautiful.’

These earlier photos were lost to oblivion as a result of Cyclone Tracy in Darwin, 1974. In the intervening years, between 1974 and 1993, Lee did visit India again with camera in hand but it wasn’t till ’93 that these first impressions crystallised into a purposeful art-photographic project. By this time, Lee’s professional and aesthetic journey had undergone various twists and turns which all have some bearing on his photography and its simple but disarming political undercurrent: to re-present beauty amongst coloured/Aboriginal men. Lee’s first tertiary undertaking, for example, was as a student at the Sydney College of the Arts in the early ’80s. He determined then to make political statements through the medium of glass, fired up by the groundswell of Indigenous protest leading into the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane. This gave way to a significant stint as a successful fashion designer, a measure of Lee’s interest in aesthetics of beauty no doubt, his designs dedicated to evening and cocktail wear for women. Eventually Lee left behind the glitz and gloss of Sydney’s fashion world and returned to the NT for work as an Aboriginal arts advisor at Mimi Aboriginal Arts & Crafts in Katherine, a job which eventually led to him undertaking a degree in anthropology, lapping up its broad appreciation of visual culture.

There are elements of Lee’s anthropological ‘gaze’ with his beginnings in street/ snapshot photography for Nice Coloured Boys, one of four discrete but related series (including Skin, Darwin Lads and On the Verge 2) which form the basis of this exhibition, Men at Ease. Studying anthropology gave Lee greater awareness of the extent to which photography served colonisation in Australia and beyond, of the medium’s power in contemporary popular culture and its subversive potential. In researching the history of his own people, the Larrika (traditional owners of the Darwin and Cox Peninsula regions), Lee became familiar with the substantial body of work by the ‘amateur’ colonial photographer Paul Foelsche (Darwin’s first police inspector). Notably, Lee has appropriated two of Foelsche’s images of Larrika people (including an 1887 portrait of his great, great grandmother, Minnie Duwun) in a pair of diptych portraits which juxtapose Foelsche’s portraits with those of Lee’s nephew, Shannon (Shaba), and his niece, Mei Kim, to suggest both the importance of ancestry and the dynamics of cultural change.

Men at Ease obviously centres on Lee’s portraits of men, which is the prime focus of his photographic work per se. One of Woollongabba Art Gallery Director Bob Mercer’s initial comments in accepting this show was that he appreciated the singularity of Lee’s focus – not to imply that Lee’s photographs all say the same thing but that there’s an admirable integrity about their overall vision. As such as these portraits collectively build a picture of masculinity, or maleness – with their intriguing inflections of cultural milieu and boy-to-manhood trajectory – they also celebrate individuality over type. They offer the connection of a real person directly facing the viewer in what was/is a personal, momentary setting. Much is made of the present-day ubiquity of photography – a signal of both user-friendly democracy and rampant surveillance. Yes, anyone can take a portrait, and Lee entertains no pretensions about his low-tech, point-and-shoot approach to the medium. But it takes a certain amount of courage to solicit a stranger, and a good deal of heart to turn these solicitations into the stuff of meaningful exchange, the substance of art.

My curatorial intention with Men at Ease is to give a sense, a ‘snapshot’, of the span of Lee’s photographic achievement. Time-wise, the works span from his first body of portraits in 1993 to his most recent series, On the Verge 2, which pairs the summary portraits of ‘boys’ from coastal Bulli, NSW, taken at the end of 2009, with those of similar aged boys from his time in wintry Varanasi, India, earlier this year. Included is an image of Bablu, Boatboy (1997), Lee’s first published photograph which was reproduced as part of a larger narrative series in a thematic Happy Snap edition (1998) of Photofile magazine. The softer, ‘faraway’ tone of this image, along with other earlier works in Lee’s Nice Coloured Boys series, reveals a contrast of technologies; the earlier analogue photographs were generally printed in India, and scanned from prints for later digital reproduction. The exhibition also conveys the span of Lee’s subjects: from the largely street photographic impulse of Nice Coloured Boys to the more deliberately constructed skin series (also from India and Nepal) with Lee’s play on ethnic camouflage in front of the lens; and closer to home with diverse Aboriginal male beauty and tropical splendour inspiring Darwin Lads, and his recent attention to white boys and youth with On the Verge 2. Incredibly, Lee’s photography has moved away from the anonymity of the street, though he still rises to this challenge, enjoying the spontaneity of life’s continuum. Undercutting the layers of ‘skin’, setting and gender for his portraits, and perhaps the most overlooked dimension of his practice, is Lee’s unique aesthetic. With an eye for the beauty and drama of the seemingly ordinary, his aesthetic may easily be dismissed, as though locked within the ‘natural’ or ‘artless’ appearance of the image. By force of its subtlety and lack of artifice, and in tune with his overall artistic concepts, Lee’s aesthetic emerges totally at ease.

Maurice O’Riordan, 2010

Notes: